

Perry's Theory: A Model for Paraprofessional Selection and Training

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Introduction

Colleges and universities have long provided a wide variety of training programs for student paraprofessionals. The type of training generally has been oriented toward the responsibilities students were expected to fulfill. Available research proves that students rate highly the training, whether it be geared toward assistance in crisis intervention (Schinke, 1979), academic advisement (Gordon, 1980), or toward various forms of peer counseling (Schptzinger, Buchanan & Fahenbach, 1976).

In the selection and training of students as paraprofessionals, questions that arise are: What type of students do we wish to select? What type of behavior do we expect after some formal training? And what type of training will accomplish this objective? Hall & Creed (1979) suggest that the use of the California Psychological Inventory can be of help in the selection and evaluation of resident assistants. Kipp (1979) has used the Personal Orientation Inventory as a predictive device for resident advisors. In the vast amount of literature on paraprofessional training, all research agrees that through training some growth takes place in students but there is little research that investigates what moves the student through identifiable stages of development. A fair amount of the available research in this area has centered around the theoretical work of William Perry (1970).

While the Perry theory was created to describe the development of a student's reasoning about knowledge, the theory can provide a framework for viewing the development of an individual's reasoning about many aspects of life. In his research, Perry found that students encountering challenges in academia seek the meaning of those challenges in different ways. Students attempt to derive meaning out of the chaos of their experiences but the particular type of meaning or order which develops depends upon the stage of their intellectual development.

Perry's theory has been used as a tool for training in academic advisement (Hillman & Lewis, 1980), counselor education (Widick & Knefelkamp, 1975) faculty and student development (Knefelkamp, 1980), and as a model of career development (Knefelkamp & Slepitza, 1978). It would appear that the Perry theory can also provide some parameters and present some insights to make the selection and training process of orientation paraprofessionals more intelligible and predictable.

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Perry Theory

While an in-depth exploration of Perry's nine stages of development is not the purpose of this article, they are briefly summarized in order to demonstrate how these stages can aid in the selection and training of paraprofessionals.

Stage 1. Dualism

This position is characterized by the simplistic view of the world in "right-wrong" terms. Students are almost completely controlled by externals in their environment. "Right answers" and "truth" exist for everyone in the absolute and are known to the teacher or "Authority" whose role it is to teach them. There is an absolute reliance on external authorities and no self-processing is evident. Those in this stage live in a world which doesn't provide developmental challenge.

Stage 2. Pre-legitimate Multiplicity

The possibility of diverse opinions is beginning to be recognized but this is perceived as the confusion of poorly qualified authorities. Knowledge is simply information and the role of the student is to receive it. Since there should be only one right answer, self-processing by the student is minimal. Students in this stage are challenged by "Authority" stating "There is another way of looking at this," but often resolve it by the rationale "Some things are not clear but someday we will know."

Stage 3. Subordinate Multiplicity

The student at this stage begins to accept diversity as legitimate but perceives it as a temporary condition until the authority finds the right answer. There is a greater realization of the possibility of making right/wrong decisions which lead to the recognition that the process of making decisions may be more complex than originally perceived. However, authority remains the provider of the process and the student wants to know what the authority wants. "Tell me what type of paraprofessional you want me to be," might be a typical Stage 3 statement.

Stage 4. Correlate Multiplicity

At this stage there is a growing realization that most areas of truth are not known, even in the sciences, and the process of decision making begins to shift from an external to an internal focus. A type of "pseudo relativism" begins to appear with the assumption that everyone's opinion is as good as everyone else's. Students tend to create their own decision-making process that is tailored to their own peculiar needs. At this stage, it's more of a declaration of independence to do "one's own thing" and develop "one's own style" without much thought to any long range effects.

Stage 5. Relativism in Context

This stage involves the student as the primary source of decision making with authority as an aid. At this point, rules begin to make sense and each context (history, math, morality) has its own rules. The student begins to perceive knowledge and values in context and in Perry's words "a cognitive flip" occurs in which the student experiences a new sense of competence and challenge in learning the process of evaluation, judgment, and supportive evidence. A variety of choices becomes available and the student develops the ability to analyze self and systematically examine alternatives.

Stage 6. Commitment Foreseen

Here the student apprehends the necessity of orienting himself/herself to a relativistic world and realizes the only way to order the chaos of legitimate alternatives is to choose. They begin to realize the pain of personal responsibility of choosing because they are not yet ready to make a personal commitment to their choice. This pain is sometimes reflected in statements such as "Maybe I should take one more course, one more test, have one more experience, before I choose."

Stage 7. Commitment Stage

While the student at the early part of this stage has the fear of being confined by making choices and eliminating others, the confrontation with loneliness and mortality leads the student to the stage of commitment. The commitment is made as a statement, and affirmation of self.

Stage 8.

Individuals in this stage experience the constant effort of self to integrate all commitments together. They begin to affirm who they are and their roles in life.

Stage 9.

This stage is a further actualization of self by experiencing the affirmation of identity among multiple responsibilities and the realization that commitment is an unfolding activity expressed through one's life style.

In briefly summarizing the nine positions, it must be remembered that there are various gradations of each stage, and that movement through each step will vary, and to a large extent depend on the environmental developmental challenge that an individual will experience. Perry mentions the phenomena of *temporizing* (delaying in a position), *escape* (detachment from responsibilities of a position), and *retreat* (regression to a lower stage) as aspects of this process of development. For an in-depth explanation of these stages, the reader is referred to Perry's book.

Paraprofessional Selection Process

From the developmental model, it would appear that the selection process of orientation paraprofessionals would normally wish to exclude applicants below stage three. While training could be expected to move students one or two positions up the scale, those who are in position two would seem to demand more developmental training. Ideally it would seem that through training, development to position five should be the objective since paraprofessionals in position five demonstrate a noticeable improvement in their relationships to new students, parents, faculty, and staff. They appear to be able to relate to students in lower positions as well as those who are their equals or above.

The process of determining a student's precise developmental position is at present very inexact. The few paper and pencil tests in existence are at best unreliable. Until valid instruments can be developed, the best recommendation to be made to the interested professional is to become familiar with Perry's original method of research and be attuned in the interview process for cues that assess the student's level of development. For example, cues that set off the student's role of self as acted upon in relationship to authority (*My father told me . . .*, *"An advisor told me. . ."*) and use of absolutes (*"I always wanted to be," "There is only one career for me,"*) quite definitely would be cues for position two. On the other hand, cues such as *"Perhaps we can work together," . . . "I see so many possibilities," . . . "I want to expand my experiences,"* are cues more amenable to a higher position.

Besides the developmental stage, other basic qualities must be considered in the selection process since some of these qualities may not be automatically present in any particular developmental stage. Some of these basic qualities necessary for an orientation paraprofessional are 1) a good first impression, 2) absence of bias and stereotyping, 3) ability to empathize and be above average in articulation, 4) ability to relate to people.

Training Process

The training process should be designed not only to fulfill objectives which would vary depending on the exact responsibilities the paraprofessionals are expected to undertake but also to provide challenge, structure, and support for the developmental process. The following might be the objectives for training exercises for orientation paraprofessionals:

1. Development of self confidence and comfort with self disclosure in order to facilitate growth of overall professionalism. Some type of "Get Acquainted" exercise (Pfeifer & Jones, 1972) with both authorities and peers provides a good deal of challenge with accompanying support, as do exercises of positive and adverse feedback which can be found in the same reference.

2. Development of communication skills and an ability to relate to all types of people. For this objective, an emphasis on the importance of first impressions (Stanat & Reardon, 1977) and non-verbal communication (Hess & Tucker, 1980)

along with a series of one-on-one videotaping sessions will raise consciousness about strengths and weaknesses. Discussions of the elements of interpersonal communication as related by Rogers (1964) assist in clarifying the communication process.

3. Development of skills for leading small group discussions. To fulfill this objective some theory is needed (Webb, 1975), along with role modeling and a chance to practice with a group under supervision and evaluation.

4. Becoming a resource of information in regard to all areas of the university. This objective will involve information about all areas new students and parents would likely need or expect and would include everything from academics, support services, structures, and buildings. It appears that this is best accomplished in information sessions with the director of each individual unit making the presentations. This allows for presentation of accurate and current information, and has the added benefit of acquainting the paraprofessionals with many university administrators who may serve as resources and role models.

Conclusion

The developmental model and the selection and training suggestions presented in this article represent only an initial effort at confronting the task of using a developmental model to make selection and training more intelligible. The lack of any reliable instrument to measure a student's developmental stage and progress in the developmental model is a great disadvantage for the beginner who seriously attempts to implement it. It also must be remembered that students tend to remain more complex than any categories in which we put them and their development is also more complex than we can attempt to describe. However, it is our experience that those responsible for training are the ones most assisted by a descriptive model. Encouraged by how exposure to this model has improved our understanding and training methods, we hope that it might in some way also help others.

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